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ABSTRACT

Based on a hypothetical situation in which second language learners must attain substantial skills in a very short time, the paper recommends intensive training not in the language itself, but in skills and strategies for learning the language. This requires achieving self-directed learning skills to: create a climate maximizing learning; identify one's own learning needs; draw realistic learning objectives from the learning needs; plan learning activities that effectively uses learning resources; locate relevant resources; carry out the learning plan; and self-monitor the learning process using appropriate measures and criteria. Each of these elements/steps in the self-directed learning process is detailed and illustrated with the case of a young woman deciding to learn Japanese on her own, for business purposes. Then the self-directed learning concept is applied to the college language curriculum, with discussion of the adjustments that must be made to accommodate the varied student population, introductory course content, and time restrictions of college instruction. Barriers to achieving self-directed learning in college language instruction are examined briefly, including logistical restrictions and learner and teacher characteristics and attitudes. A number of techniques to promote autonomous language learning are described. Contains 47 references. (MSE)

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Learning How to Learn: Self-Directed Learning in Teaching Japanese

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ABSTRACT

Importance of autonomous/self-directed learning skills in a foreign language learning has long been recognized (Wenden 1991). Language curriculum within an institutional setting has many limitations. Autonomous learning skills can assist learners in overcoming these limitations imposed by institutions (Thomson 1995). However, it can be a difficult task for teachers of foreign language to make a shift from "pedagogy" (the art and science of teaching) to "andragogy" (the art and science of helping the learners learn) (Knowles 1980, Nunan 1996). In the new environment, teachers have to accept a new role of a facilitator in a learning community where autonomous learning is promoted. This presentation defines learner autonomy and self-directed learning skills, and then discusses curriculum options which incorporate self-directed learning and new roles of teachers.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF...

A multinational organization contacts you, a language professional, and invites you to serve as a consultant/instructor for a new project. (Big money!) The organization has invested in a joint venture with a large high-tech corporation of the country whose language is your expertise (e.g. Japanese). A new plant will be built soon in the country (e.g. Japan) and the organization has recruited 5 graduates who have majored

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in the target language and assigned 5 engineers in the specified technical areas to the project. The engineers have no background in the target language. Your job is to prepare the ten project members so that they can function in the target language environment and successfully run the project in cooperation with their counterparts. You will meet the group for 3 days, a total of 24 hours, before their departure to the country.

Your first reaction may be that you'd turn down this invitation: "Those people in the corporate world know nothing about language teaching. The language majors may be all right, but the language majors aren't necessarily functional in business, professional, or technical language. The engineers with no language background! No way! In 24 hours! They are in the dream world. Whoever came up with this idea must be a mono-lingual ****. Besides, who can teach the group of such distinct backgrounds together. After all money isn't everything."

If you are crazy enough, you may start asking yourself such fundamental questions as:

1) What would you teach them in 24 hours?
2) How would you teach them effectively?
3) How would you assess their learning?

In considering the first question on selection of content, you would come to the obvious conclusion that there is not enough time to teach everything they would need to know in 24 hours and you would have to be very selective. You would also realize that you are not familiar with the technical area that they will be working in, thus, may not be able to select appropriate teaching materials. As for the second question on teaching approach and method, you would have to consider the learner diversity and how to deal with it. Would you prepare two separate materials and deliver composite lessons? Would you negotiate with the organization so that they will let you deliver two separate training sessions? In consultancy you would always be conscientious about accountability. A form of assessment may be necessary in order to report on the outcome of the training session to the employer. Would you consider a small test at the end of the session, perhaps different tests for the two groups?

LEARNER AUTONOMY TO THE RESCUE

It is clearly a very difficult situation and the traditional approach to language teaching may not fulfill the tall order you are faced with. Although the situation given here is fiction, there has been a similar situation reported. I recall it was a report from the British Council, assisting Malaysian scientists in forestry with some knowledge of English to learn professional English in 3 days to cope with a government sponsored project. Their answer was to assist the participants in how to learn on their own. Their outcome of the 3 days session was a detailed learning plan for the group. In other words, the teacher didn't teach them English, but empowered them with the skills of self-directed learning, the tools to be autonomous learners.

As for this example, I can see a program with a goal that states :

> "At the end of this training program, the participants will each have a workable collaborative plan of learning the target language and communication skills while in the target country, and the skills to learn them, for the purpose of successful participation in XYZ project." (A rough 3-day plan for this training on learner autonomy is attached in Appendix 1.)

WHAT IS LEARNER AUTONOMY AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING SKILLS?

It all sounds wonderful, but does it really work? What is learner autonomy anyway? How can we define the skills related to learner autonomy? One of the classic definitions is by Holec (1981) and he defines autonomy as "a capacity or fundamental critical ability to reflect on one's experience and to take charge of one's own learning". To make it a bit more concrete, I would like to define autonomy in terms of self-directed learning skills as follows. Self-directed learning requires:

1) Skills to create a climate where learning can be maximized.
2) Skills to identify own learning needs.
3) Skills to draw realistic learning objectives from the learning needs.
4) Skills to plan learning activities that effectively uses learning resources.
5) Skills to locate relevant learning resources to achieve the objectives.
6) Skills to carry out the leaning plan.
7) Skills to self-monitor the learning process and outcome using appropriate assessment measures and criteria. (taken from Knowles 1980, Dickenson 1987, Thomson 1997)

In my view, when learners possess the above skills and use them, perhaps to a varying degree, they are considered autonomous learners. At individual level, an example of an autonomous learner may be found in the following case of a fictitious manager of an Australian wine producing company. The company decides to export its wine to Japan and needs to develop marketing strategies. They find a Japanese import agency and they will send the manager to Japan for the initial contact. The manager doesn't know any Japanese, but for being a second generation Italian migrant, she knows very well that language sensitivity will assist her a great deal in Japan. She decides to study Japanese. The above list of skills of self-directed learning is also a list of steps to be taken in the process of self-directed learning.

Step 1: Creating a favorable climate

The manager has two months before her departure. She discusses her plan to learn Japanese with her boss and receives approval, as well as some financial support from the company to hire a tutor. She is also given concession to leave work one hour early two days a week to meet with her Japanese tutor. At home she discusses the learning endeavor with her spouse and asks him to take over the supervision of her sons' homework, which is normally her responsibility, during the two months. He agrees. By doing the above she successfully used her first skill of creating a climate that will maximize her learning.

Step 2: Identifying needs

She already knows her general needs to learn the Japanese language. However, unless she critically examines how much Japanese and what kind of Japanese she needs, she will not be able to draw realistic learning objectives. Her intuition tells her that she needs "language sensitivity" rather than "language ability". She also discusses her needs with her tutor and colleagues who have some experiences with Japanese business. From these discussions and own reflection, she comes to see that her real needs lie in acquisition of smooth communication skills with Japanese business persons using both English and Japanese, rather than restricted learning of Japanese language itself. She has sufficiently identified her own learning needs.

Step 3: Drawing objectives

She now draws learning objectives based on the needs. Her objectives include such items as pronouncing Japanese names correctly, appropriately exchanging business cards,

knowing the relevant topics for the first meeting, and knowing what sort of events take place before and after the first meeting (e.g. the first meeting often extends to an invitation to a dinner). She uses information gathered from discussions with her tutor and colleagues and from reference reading materials on Japanese business encounters to collaboratively draw her objectives with her tutor.

Step 4: Planning learning activities

She actively assists her tutor in planning learning activities. For example, she collects Japanese business cards from her colleagues who have already met some Japanese business persons and practices the pronunciation of Japanese names on the cards with the tutor.

Step 5: Finding learning resources

In earlier steps, she has already used learning resources, such as her tutor, her colleagues, reference books and business cards. She is very "resourceful" and uses a variety of learning resources around her throughout her learning process.

Step 6: Carrying out the plan

As a working adult, she faces many conflicting demands on her time. However, she has to say that this is what she is going to do and just carry it out. In her case, the fact that she is receiving financial support from her employer and the fact that she is leaving for Japan in two months bind her to her learning process. However, when there is no real urgency to the plan, and considering we, human beings, are weak creatures, it might be a good idea to draw a learning contract to bind oneself to a learning process. (Appendix 2)

Step 7: Self-monitoring

In her case, she can assess her learning outcome during her visit to Japan. Can she pronounce Japanese names correctly; can she exchange business cards appropriately, etc. This is reality testing. The outcome of her self-monitoring will be used in her next learning effort and by the next person the company sends to Japan.

I would like to clarify here that autonomous learning does not equate with individual learning. As outlined above, actions taken in autonomous learning are self-directed, however, they do not exclude cooperation from others. The manager gained cooperation from her tutor, colleagues and spouse. In reality testing, she has to collaborate with native speakers. As Smith (1997) argues, autonomy can encompass collaborative learning.

Skills to gain collaboration, in other words, skills to effectively use human learning resources, I believe, are a part of skills of autonomous learning.

LEARNER AUTONOMY IN OUR CURRICULUM?

The above describes learner autonomy at its best. The manager is clearly in charge of her own learning. But isn't it a special case of a unique working adult? How does it all relate to our classroom teaching and university language curriculum? We so far examined two cases that involved learner autonomy. The first case was on the joint venture and the second case was the manager in the wine industry. The two cases are actually not so far-fetched from our classrooms in schools and universities.

The learner

In case of the group of learners in the joint venture, the language majors and the engineers had two distinct language proficiency levels and two distinct professional backgrounds. Having distinct groups of learners in a class is by no means unusual. In my teaching I also meet learners from distinct groups. Furthermore, they are diverse in multi-dimensions. They have different cultural and language backgrounds; diverse past exposure to Japanese language; some have in-country experiences and others don't; they come with assorted university majors and various professional aspirations, thus with divergent needs. They all come with different learning styles and strategies, various past learning experiences and life experiences. There is no such a class of homogeneous learners. We need to accept learner diversity and prepare ourselves to cope with learner diversity.

The content

These days I am wondering if there should be such a thing as "generic" first year foreign language textbook. As a native Japanese speaker, I of course speak Japanese, but I do not have a capability to carry out an intelligent conversation on semi-conductor with an engineer in Japanese. I recently had a very trying learning experience when I served as Acting Head of School in the harsh climate of restructuring at UNSW. I quickly came to realize that I did not possess enough proficiency in English in the particular discourse of Heads of School meeting in the Faculty of Commerce and Economics. No English textbook prepared me for the discourse. When it comes down to it, all communication acts require language for a specific purpose. Some specific situations are familiar to me and others are foreign.

The inevitable learner diversity discussed above demands diversity in languages that need to be taught. Our case of the joint venture had to address technical language, which we may not be comfortable with. It would be very arrogant of us if we said that we are well prepared to deliver language content for our classroom teaching. In our classrooms, where students majoring in engineering, architecture, medicine, history, education, finance, accounting, marketing, sociology, politics, etc., meet, what type of language should we address? As language professionals, can we cope with, say, the language for solar energy scientists? In the joint venture case, it would only work out if the group of language majors acted as resource persons for language, the group of engineers informed the others of technical discourse, and both groups went through the learning process collaboratively. In order for us, language professionals, to give room for the learners to learn specific languages beyond 'generic' language, we must involve our learners in their learning process. We must rely on the learners' own resourcefulness to cater to diverse needs for diverse languages. For the learners to fully participate in the learning process, particularly as resource persons, they have to be versed in autonomous learning skills.

The time restriction

Both cases were situated in the limited time frames, one in 3 days and the other in two months. We also have time restrictions in our university teaching. Some of our students study with us for a semester, that is about 70 instruction hours. A few honors students study with us for 4 years, that is about 560 hours. Are 4 years long enough to teach our students everything they would need in all possible encounters they would have with the Japanese, or the Chinese for that matter, in the future? Absolutely no. Our language curriculum not only needs to prioritize learning objectives, but also needs to include autonomous learning skills so that the learners can keep learning even after they leave our program and can cope with new sets of learning objectives they will meet in the future.

WHY DOESN'T EVERYONE DO IT?

Now you may agree that having our learners participate in their learning process as autonomous learners is ideal, even in our classroom based university teaching. However, in our university teaching, there are three major hurdles in delivery of the curriculum that address learner autonomy: 1) logistic and organizational restriction of the university; 2) the learners; and 3) teachers.

University restrictions

University education is normally set to group and uniform style of teaching. In the beginning of the term, a uniform syllabus or course outline is distributed to all students who are enrolled in the course. The syllabus states course objectives and assessment measures and criteria. Then the course is run according to the syllabus. It is very difficult for students to participate in the initial decision making on the course outline. At the end of the term there is a uniform testing, called the final exam. Universities often set restrictions such as "at least 60% of the assessment must come from the final exam." Lecturers have to write final exams in the middle of the term in order to meet the university's printing deadline. Even if the lecturer finds that some of the content in the final exam is irrelevant to the group of students, he would still have to teach it, because it is already printed. The system makes it logistically difficult to deliver courses that promotes learner autonomy. For example, when students in the subjects want to meet on Tuesday in stead of the scheduled Monday, the teacher experiences a most difficult time trying to find a vacant room on campus. Such fundamental facilities as rooms that accommodate group discussion (e.g. tables and chairs are not affixed to the floor) are hard to come by.

The learner

Partly because school education (not only the university education) is structured to discourage learner autonomy, and partly because the learners' past social experiences do not reinforce learner autonomy, and for some other reasons, our learners are not particularly good at being autonomous in language learning in learning situations within institutions such as a university. The learners come to our university classes with expectations as to what constitutes university teaching. More than often, they expect the teachers to plan what to teach, teach whatever there is to teach and evaluate what they have taught. Ultimate in this way of thinking is in the statement that "teachers are paid to teach; it's their job to teach." In many Asian context, a teacher and student carry on a relationship of a master and disciple. This expectation is also brought into our classroom. They are often puzzled and sometimes angry whey they are given responsibilities in their own learning, such as participating self-assessment (Thomson 1996b).

The teacher

Promoting learner autonomy is more difficult for teachers than for learners. Most teachers are trained within the framework of "pedagogy" which is defined as the art and science of teaching. The new notion of "andragogy", the art and science of helping learners learn

(Knowles 1980), is threatening to those. They fear that they would lose power. Some teachers do not believe that students are equipped to take charge of their own learning. Studies in learner autonomy have shown that it is often the teachers, not learners, who resist promotion of learner autonomy (Nunan 1996).

WHY LEARNER AUTONOMY?

Within the institutional restrictions, given resistance both from the learners and teachers, I still believe in learner autonomy. Let me summarize here, why I still believe that we need to promote learner autonomy.

1) Practical reasons

In some situations, it is impossible for learners to attend regular classes, such as busy professionals, and physically handicapped people. For these learners, it is a matter of self-instruction or nothing.

2) Individual differences

Autonomous learning skills on the part of learners enable us, the teachers, to cope with learner diversity in cognitive styles, learning strategies, needs, past exposures, content areas, to name a few.

3) Educational aims

Self-directed learning facilitates the development of strategies that characterize the "good" language learner. It also fulfills requirements for continuous education.

4) Motivation

Being in charge of one's own learning can have a positive effect on motivation.

5) Learning how to learn

This reason cuts across several of the others already summarized. Finding out about the learning process, planning learning, using appropriate strategies, and self-monitoring is a basic and important educational objective.

6) Intercultural communication/contact situation

The skills that the above objective aims at are directly relevant in intercultural communication and contact situations. Autonomous learning skills seem to have a positive effect on skills to competently manage contact situations. (Dickenson 1987, Thomson 1992)

Within the constraints we live, we can perhaps make some difference in promoting learner autonomy. Esch (1996) states:

> ...in talking about 'promoting learner autonomy' I am only arguing for the provisions of circumstances and contexts for language learners which will make it more likely that they take charge--at least temporarily--of the whole or part of their language-learning program and which are more likely to help rather than prevent learners from exercising their autonomy (p.37).

We can, in promotion of learner autonomy, provide ample learning resources and flexible, innovative curriculum.

THE CURRICULUM

How can we incorporate autonomous learning into our school and university curriculum? There are some variety. The first type is to utilize classroom community and give learners chances to provide input into curriculum (e.g. Thomson 1992, 1998). The second type is to give students options to choose from, including the learning contract.

Classroom survey (Thomson 1992)

The first case is in the 3rd week of a beginning Japanese course. The target task was to administer a survey to their peers on their Japanese language learning experiences. The learners first created their own vocabulary list, using dictionaries (physical learning resource) and teacher (human learning resource). Using the vocabulary list (physical learning resource) and being assisted by the teacher (human learning resource), they created a survey. They tried out the survey (physical learning resource) on their own classmates (human learning resources). Then they were dispatched to administer the survey (physical learning resources) to the peers (human learning resources) from different tutorial groups whom they had never met before. They came back to the original group and compiled the survey results to write a written report to be presented to the teacher. The learners in the classroom community collaboratively accessed all available human learning resources; teacher, classmates, and peers in other tutorial groups. They actively used available physical resources; dictionaries, vocabulary list, survey and survey results. A notable feature here is that all physical learning resources but dictionaries were created by the learners themselves. Although the main framework of the task was given by the teacher, the learners were involved in selecting and creating learning resources.

Junior teachers (Thomson 1998)

The second case is done in collaboration of first year (about 200 students) and third year Japanese students. Some 20 third year students visited first year classes regularly and acted as junior teachers for the semester. Objectives of this arrangement were two-folds: first to give authentic interactive opportunities to the third year students, or junior teachers, as they interact with the first year teachers in lesson planning and classroom activities; and second to give first year students more dimensions to classroom interactions. Classroom interactions tend to be either teacher-student or student-student interactions. Participation of junior teachers added junior teacher-teacher interactions, and junior teacher-student interactions. Junior teachers were enormously popular among first year students for giving them non-threatening guidance. Junior teachers in turn gained opportunity to self-assess their ability while assisting the first year students. The third year students and the first year students were human learning resources to each other.

Visitors to the classroom community (Thomson 1997)

The classroom community can also take in the outside human learning resources and make availability of the resources visible to the learners (e.g. Ozaki & Neustupny 1986, Muraoka 1992, Thomson in press a). The case introduced in Thomson (1997) is the 3rd year Japanese language course involving about 100 learners that hosted over 150 Japanese visitors in a year. The visitors included a group of working holiday youths, a group of retired senior citizens, a group of company wives, and a group of businessmen. The learners were actively involved in every step of the visits in making telephone confirmations, escorting the visitors to event sites, acting as receptionists and masters-of-ceremony, showing the guests around the campus, seeing them off, and writing thank you letters. The learners met and interacted with visitors who are human learning resources. Special features here are that the learners interact with four distinct types of Japanese and that the learners initiate to build their Japanese language network with the visitors. After a year, the learners are keenly aware of the existence of the Japanese population in Sydney.

The learners go out of the classroom (Masumi-So 1997)

The learners may go out of the classroom to meet learning resources in local community (e.g. Thomson 1991, Umeda 1993, Ueda 1995, Masumi-So 1997). Thomson (1991) describes her first year students in Singapore, in groups, interviewing Japanese tourists in tourist spots. Umeda (1993), Ueda (1995) and Masumi-So (1997) reports that their students visited local Japanese residents, homes in Singapore, Thailand and Sydney, respectively. As Masumi-So (1997) examines, classroom is a home domain for the

learners and the Japanese visitors tend to accommodate their speech and behavior to suite the learners, while the local Japanese residences are the home domain for the Japanese, therefore the Japanese tend to act more normally. In all cases, the learners extensively prepared themselves for these interactions and the opportunities provided the learners with a diverse array of interactions. The Japanese hosts were human learning resources, and their homes were physical learning resources.

Sydney Explorer

The degree of diversity of interactions and learning resources, and the degree of the learners being in charge of their own interactions increased from the classroom community to the visitors to the home-visits. However the above are all conducted under the safe umbrella that their teachers provided. The learners can be given more responsibilities in selecting their learning resources. A group of third year students underwent a project called Sydney Explorer successfully with minimum guidance of a teacher. The learners chose 5 events each in a semester in which they interacted with either human, physical, social or information service learning resources. Every week the teacher informed the learners of Japan related events, thus acted as an information service learning resource. The learners were also provided with the Resource Bank of Sydney Learning Resources. The learners chose a variety of interactive events such as playing golf with Japanese businessmen, going to Karaoke bars to sing Japanese songs with Japanese friends, getting hair cuts in Japanese-speaking saloons, visiting the Japanese School's FETE, and most popular was, as expected, going to Japanese restaurants with Japanese friends. As most students participated in these events with their Japanese friends, they extended their Japanese speaking network considerably.

Learning Contract

Students are given such options as below in my Level 3 course.

- Fortune Hunter's Writing Clinic
- Listening and Pronunciation Clinic (incl. Speech Contest) [up to 10 students]
- Junior Teacher Internship [up to 16 students]
- Sydney Explorer
- Email Correspondent [up to 10 students]
- Learning Contract

Students who have specific needs and goals can be directed to Learning contracts. My students have gone through various project using learning contracts in the past such as below:

- Listen to Japanese pop music. Using word processor, type two song lyrics per week. Look up words, and write sentences using the words. Translate the lyrics into English. Sing the songs and record them.
- Watch Japanese movies/TV shows (it can be an animation), transcribe the scripts, write summaries and critiques.
- Study Japanese for specific purposes, e.g. Marketing, Finance. Read Japanese language materials in the specific area or newspaper articles. Build a vocabulary inventory. Write summaries and critiques.
- Read a Japanese novel, learn expressions and vocabulary, discuss cultural connotations, summarize, write essays regarding pertinent points of the novel.

Keys to a successful learning contract project is a well written contract. It should have

- clearly defined learning objectives
- learning objectives with specific range
- achievable objectives within the given time frame
- learning objectives that are relevant to the learner's level of proficiency
- learning activities that are directly relevant to the learning objectives
- learning activities that are doable
- concrete learning activities
- learning resources that fit the learning activities
- obtainable learning resources (time-wise, in case of human resources)
- clear learning schedule
- realistic learning schedule
- assessment plan that reflects the learning objectives
- concrete assessment plan
- evident deadline.

Teacher roles

- Explain the merit of using learning contracts and theoretical underpinnings to the learners
- Explain the procedures and content of the learning contract project well to remove any uncertainty from the learners
- Present successful projects of the past students
- Support the learners in finding meaningful learning objectives
- Support the learners in locating relevant learning resources
- Support the learners in creating learning tasks
- Monitor learning process
- Assess learning against learning objectives

PROMOTION OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Identifying learning resources, making the learners aware of them, and making the resources accessible through innovative curriculum arrangements hopefully promote diverse usage of learning resources and encourage a variety of interactions between the learners and resources. This in turn is hoped to promote learner autonomy. We need to bear in our mind that whether or not to make it happen is all up to the teachers. As Vieira (1997) states, learner autonomy starts from teacher development.

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Appendix 1: XYZ Project Language Training Program

1. Goal

At the end of this training program, the participants will each have a workable collaborative plan of learning the target language and communication skills while in the target country, and the skills to learn them, for the purpose of successful participation in XYZ project.

2. Tentative Objectives

(It may well change as results of negotion between the program convenor and participants.)

(a) Create a climate where learning can be maximised.

(b) Identify learning needs.

(c) Draw learning objectives.

(d) Identify learning resources.

(e) Plan learning activities.

(f) Plan learning schedule.

(g) Agree on assessment measures and criteria.

3. Tentative Time Table

Day 1

- Getting to know each other. (a)
- Consensus building on the program objectives (a)
- Group discussion on defining the expectation of the organisation. (b)
- Selecting priority learning areas. (c)
- Lisitng of learning resources under categories of Human Resources; Physical Resources; Community Resources; and Information Service Resources. (d)
- Discussion of possible activities. (e)
- Discussion of collaborative arrangement between language majors and engineers. (a, e)
- Listing of unknowns.
- Day 2 work assignment.

Day 2 (Morning)

Individual and group work on the assignment such as:

- Collecting target language materials on the priority areas. (d)
- Clarification of expectations with Executives of the organization. (b)
- Locating key personnels among the counterpart. (d)
- Locating Information Service sources and Community Resources in both this country and off shore (d).

Teacher would also collect resources.

Day 2 (Afternoon)

- Report back to the group and clarification of unknowns. (b,c,d)
- Start writing some learning plans. (f)

Day 3

- Discussion on learning activities and learning plans. (g,f)
- Trial of some learning activities and reflection. (f, h)
- Modification of learning plans. (g)
- Consider assessment (h)
- Finalization of learning plan.

By the end of Day 3, all relevant information collected on Day 2 will be typed and compiled and a copy each will be distributed to all participants.

4. Outcome

- Learner resource file (Lists of resource persons, information sources, reference materials, copies of learning materials, etc.)
- Individual detailed learning plan